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ABSTRACT

The Rhodes College (Memphis, Tennessee) History of Opera class collaborated with Opera Memphis to create a documentary on regional opera production, to present online information about Opera Memphis through a World Wide Web home page, and to construct a class home page to be used as a repository for examples of creative writing. The project required students to work in teams and to publish their findings on the World Wide Web. Assignments included: interviewing a music critic, artists, and producers; performing in the production; photographing the production; and creating multimedia quizzes. Students gained experience with the production of an opera, and developed technical skills that can be applied across academic disciplines. Observations of the process determined: (1) the class worked as a team and interacted with each other in a more meaningful way than typically occurs in a lecture format class; (2) students' perceptions of opera changed positively; (3) students learned to appreciate the difficulty faced by arts organizations to achieve high quality on a limited budget; (4) students' writing was read by a worldwide audience; and (5) the class had pride of ownership in their work, because, unlike the usual research paper, their papers had a continued existence. (Author/SWC)

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ED 400 820

Rhodes College and Opera Memphis Web Project

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Abstract:

The Rhodes College History of Opera class collaborated with Opera Memphis to create a documentary on regional opera production, to present online information about Opera Memphis, and to construct a class home page to be used as a repository for examples of creative writing. The project required students to work in teams and to publish their findings on the Web. It resulted in students' gaining experience with the production of an opera. It also enabled them to develop technical skills that can be applied across academic disciplines.

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Overture

In recent years a great deal has been written about the need to revise the way college classes are being taught. In an effort to provide some alternatives to the traditional lecture format, educators have looked at methods that involve more active participation by students, working in teams, on projects that take them outside of the classroom. At the same time, the of exploring the resources of the Internet has become a part of daily life for almost everyone on college campuses today. The interactivity provided by the Internet and, more recently, that part of it known as the Web, has given educators a powerful new tool that enables them to connect class work to the outside world in some very concrete ways.

A method of teaching that enables students to experience the subject matter is particularly desirable in fine arts courses. Reading about musical performances must be supplemented by more tangible experiences. In the case of a History of Opera course, involvement with actual productions is ideal.

Act I

In the spring of 1995, Rhodes College and Opera Memphis began collaborating on a project that brought some of the benefits of the Internet to both institutions. For several years, the Music Department at Rhodes has offered a History of Opera course. As part of the course, students have attended productions of Opera Memphis. In the past, students have been limited to observation. However, after teaching this course for several years, I felt that the experience would be improved if students were able to watch an opera being built from the very beginning. This would include attending rehearsals, interviewing singers and technicians, as well as talking with the business manger, the president of the Opera Board, the advertisers and others who had a part in mounting the production. At the end of this process they would compile their work into a unified class documentary. The advent of HTML and the easy creation of Web pages provided a perfect method for publishing the final product.

In June, 1995, I presented this idea to Michael Ching, Artistic Director of Opera Memphis. We constructed a plan whereby the History of Opera students would create a documentary called "The Making of *Rigoletto*" after the company's October, 1995 production of the Verdi opera. In the spring of 1996 another project would be created about the world premiere of Mike Reid's opera *Different Fields*. This new work was part of a collaboration between Opera Memphis and the Metropolitan Opera Guild. The opera, which deals with corruption in professional football, is designed to appeal to a young audience. It seemed logical that exposure on the Internet might be one effective way to advertise its performances.

In addition to creating the pages about *Rigoletto* and *Different Fields*, we decided to create an official home page for Opera Memphis to be run from the music department web server at Rhodes. This page would be maintained there until Opera Memphis set up its own server. It would contain information about the company's history, the current season, ticket prices, and a collection of production photographs from recent seasons. Members of the class would aid in design and creation of this page. A survey of opera companies with online home pages showed that, in addition to the major houses such as the Metropolitan and La Scala, many regional opera companies also had a presence on the Web. Opera Memphis has a distinguished history and is in its 40th season. It was clearly to its advantage to join this list of important opera companies on the Web.

Finally, I constructed a Music 121: History of Opera home page to be a repository of materials relative to the class. It contains the class description, the syllabus, and a listing of important opera resources elsewhere on the Web. Primarily, however, it serves as a site for the publication of essays on opera written by class members.

Act II

The eighteen students who enrolled in the History of Opera class in the fall semester of 1995 had limited experience with the Internet and no experience in the creation of Web pages. None of them had ever been involved with opera production. Therefore, they came as complete novices on all fronts. In the first three weeks of class they became comfortable exploring the Web and exchanging documents over the campus file server. They also used multimedia opera projects created with Digital Chisel authoring software.

After working with them for the first few weeks, I made assessments about which tasks were appropriate for which students. I explained the concept and made

suggestions about how duties should be divided. However, they made the final decision about how they wanted to participate. The major areas covered were:

- Music Criticism: One student interviewed the music critic on the local paper to see how he went about evaluating a performance. Happily, the critic was so interested in the class project that he wrote an article about it for his newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal.*

- Interviews with Artists: Several students interviewed singers, chorus members, and other performers to find out what is required to be a professional performer. The interviews were done during breaks at the rehearsals.

- Interviews with Producers: Several of the interviews were with the people responsible for financing and producing the opera. The interviews were conducted over the telephone or at the offices of the various business people.

- Performance: One student agreed to be a member of the chorus. This involved two weeks of rehearsal and large commitment of time and energy.

- Photography: One student attended several rehearsals and the performance in order to photograph the building of the work. We scanned her photographs and inserted them into the appropriate locations.

- Multimedia Quizzes: Three students learned the basics of creating interactive tests using Digital Chisel software. They created two multiple choice quizzes about the history of *Rigoletto*. These products were compressed using Stuffit Deluxe and imbedded in the home page.

Act III

The class did most of their interviews and research in the two weeks preceding the performance. They attended the performance as a group, very well versed in information about the opera itself as well as knowledge of this particular production. In the days following they submitted electronic copies of their reports. In some cases their articles contained names and terms that could be linked to other locations on the Web. They provided a listing of these URLs with their paper.When all the information was collected I constructed the documentary. However, students were involved in decisions about design, layout,

and the choice of graphics to be used. The final product was online within a month after the project started.

After the Rigoletto project was finished students continued to use the class home page to publish papers they wrote on comparisons of *Don Giovanni* and *Carmen*, comparisons of the Bayreuth and the Metropolitan productions of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and a finally set of reviews of several 20th century operas. Each paper contains a mailto function that encourages reader reaction to their work.

What the Critics Said

"The Making of *Rigoletto*" documentary, the Opera Memphis Home Page, and the Music 121: History of Opera home page required a significant amount of work for both professor and students. The question must be asked if the extra time and effort was worth it. The following observations of the process may be helpful in evaluating its effectiveness:

- Members of the class worked as a team and interacted with each other in a more meaningful way than typically occurs in a lecture format class. It was virtually impossible for a member of the class to chose to be passive and invisible.

- Students began to perceive opera as engaging and entertaining, not simply as a relic from the past.

- Students learned to appreciate how difficult it is for arts organizations to produce the highest possible standard of work and at the same time live within limited budgets.

- Students were very aware that their writing was being read by a worldwide audience. Within the first month, the project had been viewed by nearly a eight hundred visitors.

- The class seemed to have a pride of ownership in their work. As the semester ended and the pages continued to receive hundreds of visits, it became apparent that their work had a continued existence, unlike the usual research paper.

From this experience I concluded that a project of this type is valuable in the teaching of music history. It serves as an enhancement to the more traditional

ways of teaching the material. It provides students with skills and ideas that they can apply to other situations. The team effort element requires them to assume responsibility and to be accountable to both the professor and their peers.

Making projects blend seamlessly into the rest of the class work is a signifcant challenge. However, as these projects become more common, the challenge will be met. At present, students still have to cope with new technologies and even with the basic concepts of computer networking. The ongoing challenge is to increase the inherent value of the class work so it is never overshadowed by the vehicle that carries it forward.